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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001288

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL KS KN

SUBJECT: EXPERTS FRUSTRATED WITH LEE'S NORTH KOREA POLICY;
DPRK SUCCESSION UNCLEAR

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In August 10 meetings with poloff, two leading experts, each of whom is close to the Lee Myung-bak Administration, were sharply critical of Lee's North Korea policy. They also agreed that the succession of Kim Jong-un to his father's place as leader of North Korea is not yet clear and were dismissive of media reports that Kim Jong-un had orchestrated the DPRK's role in former President Clinton's visit to Pyongyang. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: It is striking that two conservative academics, each of whom is close to the Administration, would be so critical of Lee's North Korea policy, and probably reflects broader frustration with his approach. The release of ROK citizen Mr. Yoo from DPRK custody on August 13 is likely to increase public demands for a more flexible policy toward North Korea, but it is unclear if Lee is willing to consider a change of course. End Comment.

Succession Still Up in the Air

¶3. (C) On August 10, poloff met with Professors Ryoo Kihl-jae and Yoo Ho-ryul, prominent experts on the DPRK, to solicit their views on the DPRK leadership succession. Ryoo, a faculty member at the University of North Korean Studies and Institute for Far Eastern Studies, quickly dismissed ROK media reports of Kim Jong-un's involvement in the Clinton visit, stating that such a rumor is "just a theory." Pointing out that Kim Jong-un had neither been mentioned by DPRK authorities nor officially nominated by KJI; Ryoo stated that the succession issue was still not certain. For Ryoo, a more important question regarding the future of North Korea was not who, but what the future of North Korea would look like.

¶4. (C) Similarly, Yoo Ho-yeol of Korea University viewed the DPRK succession as uncertain, adding that now was a critical time for Kim Jong-un. Yoo interpreted the fact that Kim Jong-un has not been mentioned by name, but vaguely referred to as the "young general," as a continuation of Kim Jong-un's "trial period." He is still being tested by KJI and other senior leaders as one among many potential candidates to succeed KJI. Yoo acknowledged similarities between the current 150-day march and the 70-day march in 1994 prior to KJI's succession, but argued "nothing was certain." The Clinton visit would be an exemplary showcase for Kim Jong-un's leadership potential, but both academics agreed that the mastermind behind the scene was probably KJI himself, not anyone else.

¶5. (C) Both scholars pointed out that unlike the succession issue, North Korean authorities have repeatedly and publicly

emphasized the importance of the year 2012, the target date for the DPRK to become a "strong and prosperous nation." Ryoo said it would be important to watch what steps North Korea would take toward this goal, and predicted if Kim Jong-un is indeed the designated successor, a formal announcement of his succession would be related to 2012.

Kim Jong-un Bad for DPRK

¶ 6. (C) If Kim Jong-un was in fact named as KJI's successor; it would be good news for the Kim regime, but not for the DPRK, according to Yoo. No change could be expected under Kim Jong-un, despite his overseas experience and western education. Yoo predicted North Korea under Kim Jong-un would continue the backward ways of his father's time, with no consideration for realistic reform. Another hereditary succession would prove that regime stability stands above all else for the Kim family, not a more prosperous North Korea.

Even Conservative Scholars Frustrated with LMB Policy

¶ 7. (C) Ryoo served as an advisor on North Korea to the Lee Myung-bak presidential transition team, but expressed concerns with Lee's hard line approach to North Korea. According to Ryoo, North Korea experts had been shut out of the policy-making process, allowing President Lee "to do whatever" on North Korea. Drawing from recent examples, Ryoo thought abrupt discontinuation of rice and fertilizer aid to North Korea was worse than not providing any aid from the beginning of the Lee administration.

¶ 8. (C) Yoo was equally discontent with the Lee administration's handling of North Korea policy, arguing for the "depoliticization" of North Korea policy in South Korea. Yoo hoped to facilitate dialogue in the near future between scholars on both ends of the political spectrum.
STEPHENS